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ABSTRACT

Several aspects of the history of religious broadcasting are examined in this paper. First, the paper provides an informative review of scholarly treatments of the history of religious broadcasting in the United States, tracing the evolution from early broadcasts of simple church services to today's evangelical paid-time programming. The paper then traces recent developments in the structure of religious television, and identifies three major trends: (1) the growth of high-energy, entertaining evangelical presentations; (2) the adoption of the broadcast/cable network system; and (3) the adaptation of traditionally secular television formats to the religious task. Next, the paper describes the viewership of religious television via a review of pertinent research literature, identifying a shift away from the stereotypical older, female viewer. The potential social effects of religious television are then explored, with primary emphasis on three areas which have garnered great criticism: the impact of religious television viewing on church attendance, the purported negative impact of religious television solicitations on church contributions, and the role of politics in religious television. Finally, the paper provides a brief description of an original investigation which examined the availability and scope of religious television in the United States. Throughout, a trend toward blurring the line between religious and secular telecasting is noted. (Author/SKC)

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# The History and Social Impact of Religious Broadcasting

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The History and Social Impact of Religious Broadcasting


## Abstract

This paper examines religious broadcasting in several regards. First, an informative review of scholarly treatments of the history of religious broadcasting in the U.S. is provided, tracing the evolution from early broadcasts of simple church services to today's evangelical paid-time programming. Second, recent developments in the structure of religious television are traced, and three major trends are identified: (1) the growth of high-energy, entertaining evangelical presentations; (2) the adoption of the broadcast/cable network system; and (3) the adaptation of traditionally secular TV formats to the religious task. Next, the viewership of religious TV is described via a review of pertinent research literature, identifying a change away from the stereotypic older, female viewer. Fourth, the potential social effects of religious television are explored, with primary emphasis on three areas which have garnered great criticism: (1) the impact of religious TV viewing on church attendance; (2) the purported negative impact of religious TV solicitations on church contributions; and (3) the role of politics in religious television. Finally, the paper provides a brief description of an original investigation which examines the availability and scope of religious television in the U.S. Throughout, a trend toward blurring the line between religious and secular telecasting is noted.



## Brief Abstract

This paper examines religious broadcasting in several regards. An informative review of scholarly treatments of the topic is provided, reviewing the history of religious broadcasting, the structure of religious television, the viewership of religious TV, and the potential effects of religious television. And, the paper provides a brief description of an original investigation which examines the availability and scope of religious television content in the U.S.

# The History and Social Impact of Religious Broadcasting

Television is intimately involved in the societal structures of today--the small screen is so pervasive an influence, it has been estimated that "more Americans have television than have refrigerators or indoor plumbing" (NIMH, 1982, p. 1). Some have said that television itself has become a religion; Kuhns (1969) developed an argument that the cultural cohesion of television entertainment content has in some ways replaced conventional religion.

> (W)hat does it mean to say that Gunsmoke does for people today what religious rites did for people of another age? That moral beliefs are conveyed and confirmed more through advertising and fantasy than through church and pulpit? In a sense the question is academic. The fact is incontrovertible: people today live "by the media" whereas once they lived "by the Book." (p. 91)

Television, the most ubiquitous and powerful medium ever, does seem particulary suited to reaching people with a profound impact. Marshall McLuhan speculated that "the medium is the message," implying that the mere experience of TV viewing may be as important to potential impacts as the specific content viewed. Addressing the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) in 1970, he noted that "the only perfect union of the medium and the message had occurred in the person of Jesus Christ" (Armstrong, 1979), but implied that TV does the second-best job. Perhaps spurred by this challenge to coalesce the word of God into our most effective form of mass communication, or perhaps motivated by the realization of television's almost mystical relationship to today's society and its possible usurpation of religion's role in our world, religious organizations have moved surely and swiftly in recent years to include TV in their ministerial efforts.

This paper examines religious broadcasting in several ways. An informative review of scholarly treatments of the topic is provided,

reviewing the history of religious broadcasting, the structure of religious television, the viewership of religious TV, and the potential effects of religious television. And, the paper provides a brief description of an original investigation which examines the availability and scope of religious television content in the U.S.

## The History of Religious Broadcasting

The decade of the 1980s has been a time of rapid growth in religious telecommunication. Over 212 broadcast stations across the country carry large amounts of religious fare offered by as many as five religious programming networks. But prior to this era, religious communicators had not exactly been strangers to broadcasting. Throughout the entire history of broadcasting in America, religious fare has played a continual role.

In fact, the first broadcast station to air regular, nonexperimental programming, KDKA in Pittsburgh, included an Episcopal church service in its first year's offerings--for the simple reason that a station engineer sang in the church choir (Hadden & Swann, 1981). The success of these broadcasts was widely emulated by numerous new stations around the country. The first regular religious broadcasts were aired on WJBT ("Where Jesus Blesses Thousands") in Chicago in 1922 (Flake, 1982). The evangelist Paul Rader had heeded the call of Chicago's mayor for volunteers to help provide program material for the city. With a group of musicians, the pastor reconstructed a typical evangelistic service on the air, bringing such high-spirited religion to thousands of listeners who otherwise would have never been exposed to it (Hadden & Swann, 1981).

From these inauspicious beginnings, religious radio grew quickly to become a small but solid portion of the early broadcast industry. Popular Radio magazine reported in 1925 that 63 of the 600 stations on the air were owned by churches or other religious groups (Hadden & Swann, 1981, p. 74). The year 1924 saw the weekly broadcast of "National Radio Pulpit," produced on WEAF in New York by the Greater New York Federation of Churches; the program went national with the formation of the NBC network (Ellens, 1974). In these early days, few regulations governed the broadcast process and licenses were easily obtained, but not so easy to hold onto. Commercial broadcasting as we know it became the mainstay by the mid-1920s, and religious broadcasters were among the first to fall to this new competition, as religious stations were bought out by commercial concerns, or failed financially, during the Depression. Also contributing to religious radio's early decline was the Radio Act of 1927, which brought tighter standards of operation (Gentry, 1984) and replaced makeshift broadcasters from the religious community with professional broadcasters.

To combat this domination by commercial enterprise, many religious broadcasters joined forces to form "electric churches"--congregations which exist only via broadcasting. The Omaha evangelical R.R. Brown invited listeners to join his World Radio Congregation, dispensing official membership cards. In addition, the late Herbert W. Armstrong--who broadcast for many years on both radio and TV--launched his "Radio Church of God" in 1934. Even the legendary Aimee Semple McPherson, an early innovator of religious radio broadcasting, established her own electronic congregation and delivered her services via radio from Los Angeles (Hadden & Swann, 1981).

However, after the advent of network radio (with the development of NBC, CBS, and Mutual Broadcasting System by 1934, and later, the split-off of ABC from NBC), the model of religious broadcasting became largely one of mainline church services. All major networks instituted policies which refused to sell time for religious broadcasting but at the same time donated time to only mainline church groups. These policies came as an effort to simplify the process of providing the public service of religious broadcasting, meeting the requirements of the FCC's Fairness Doctrine. In 1928, for example, NBC set up a cooperative agreement with the 25-denomination Federal Council of Churches of Christ to be the sole source of Protestant programming, an arrangement which made life easier for NBC but had an inhibiting influence on local church access to broadcasting. In essence this limited much religious broadcasting to the preaching model of all FCCC broadcasts, which were patterned to avoid controversy and matters of doctrine (Gentry, 1984).

The success of the FCCC was followed by the formation of other coalitions of mainline churches: the Joint Religious Radio Committee (JRRC) in 1944 and the Southern Religious Radio Conference (SRRC) in 1945. The former included such churches as Methodist, Presbyterian USA, and Congregational, and was later noted for its innovative programming that included children's programming and missionary educational shows; the latter included Southern Baptist, Lutheran, and Episcopal churches (Ellens, 1974).

Perhaps the only religious broadcaster who was notably successful in gaining access to the airwaves outside of the coalition system was Walter Maier, host and producer of "The Lutheran Hour" from 1930 until his death

in 1950. Reported by some to be the "most popular regular broadcast--religious or secular--in the history of radio," it was heard around the world by an estimated 20 million listeners. Maier is credited with having "probably preached to more people than any other person in history" up to that point in time (Armstrong, 1979, p. 39).

Independent evangelicals grew understandably concerned over the dominance of large organized religion in broadcasting, and formed the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, which was replaced by the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) in 1944. This group has grown and developed in diversity over the years, and is very active today--over 850 NRB members reportedly produced over 70% of all religious broadcasts in the U.S. in 1978. Its members reached an approximated weekly audience of 115 million by radio and an additional 14 million by television (Stentzel, 1978).

By the early 1950s, television had usurped radio as the most popular mass medium. At first, the religious community was slow to adapt to this change. Parker, Barry and Smythe (1955), surveying 91 Protestant ministers in Connecticut, found them to be skilled and experienced in the use of radio for religious purposes, but relatively naive about television. Indeed, a majority of the ministers didn't even own a TV--46% were TV owners, as compared with 76% of the general population. The majority of the ministers did, however, favor using TV to enhance church attendance, and did not feel it would reduce active participation in their churches.

It took a 57-year-old Roman Catholic bishop to spark the imaginations of America's would-be religious television broadcasters. Bishop Fulton

Sheen's live TV program from New York City, entitled "Life is Worth Living," ran from 1952 through 1957; his magnetic style and practiced eloquence made the program one of the most popular of its time. Although obviously Catholic in orientation, Sheen's messages were designed to reach both believers of all faiths, and non-believers. Millions of people viewed his inspiring prime-time programs. Sheen's success convinced religious practitioners that television could be a dramatically effective medium for spreading the word and increasing the flock.

Through the mid-1960s, religious television continued to develop, but primarily as a forum for established, mainline churches. Most of the time allocated to religion was still provided free of charge by TV stations or networks as part of their public service responsibility and nonmainline evangelists were largely excluded from the councils of churches that controlled programming. According to Curtis (1978, p. 21) these evangelists "had to purchase time to have a voice and presence in television. Most prestigious stations had a policy against 'commercial religion' and refused to sell them time." Consequently, most religious programming was rather similar in focus and appearance. Ellens (1974) characterized religious broadcast practices as falling into only four categories: (1) using the camera and microphone as an extended pulpit (e.g., Bishop Fulton Sheen), (2) creating a spectacle (e.g., Billy Graham specials), (3) to teach (e.g., the National Council of Churches' "Lamp Unto My Feet," and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's "This Is The Life"), and (4) to provoke earnest thought in "spot" public service announcements.

In the years since the 1960s, however, there has been a trend toward

increasing evangelical content and a wider variety in religious broadcasting. Horsfield (1982, p.88) has stated that "evangelical paid-time (emphasis added) programming has virtually taken over the religious broadcast field" as these individuals came to realize that on-air requests for donations could pay for all costs of program production and distribution. As the costs for air-time increased, however, so did the diversity of religious programming in an effort to draw an increasingly large audience to defray costs. Consequently, many changes in the structure of religious programming were evident.

## The Structure of Religious Television

During the 1970s churches had to deal with an America which placed decreasing importance on religious life. A 1978 Gallup poll found 41% of Americans, primarily young, mobile and male, were not attending a regular Sunday morning church service. The survey found a sharp decline in the percentage of U.S. residents who viewed religion as "very important." Fifty-three percent expressed this view in 1978, down from 70% in 1965 and 75% in 1952 (Gallup, 1978, p. 16).

Three general approaches to dealing with this problem have been taken by religious telecasters: (1) by exciting the interest of audience members through high-energy and highly entertaining evangelical and/or charismatic presentations; (2) by adopting the broadcast or cable network system to religious-oriented programming in order to provide a strong foothold for independent religious telecasters; and (3) by adapting traditionally secular formats to the religious arena in order to broaden religious TV's target audiences.

Evangelical Presentations. Although present-day critics of religious TV continue to lambast many TV evangelicals for boring and/or pompous displays and appeals for funds (Cleath, 1978), expensively-produced programs (Lammers, 1982), or contact at an impersonal level (Petersen, 1978), there is no doubt that these dynamic electronic preachers have been largely responsible for religious TV's surge in popularity. The success stories are many, and form a litany of today's most popular televangelists:

> Oral Roberts, once a tubercular stutterer, parlayed a portable revival tent and a healing hand into an electronic ministry and a hospital as tall as the seven-story Jesus who appeared to him one night in a dream vision. Jim Bakker, the son of a factory worker, began as a puppeteer and became the misty-eyed host of "The PTL Club,". . . and president of the PTL (Praise the Lord) Network. Robert Schuller, or the "Hour of Power," began preaching atop the refreshment stand in an Orange County drive-in theater, and now speaks from a cheery sunlit pulpit in a monumental high-tech cathedral. The most famous of all parvenu preachers, of course, is Jerry Falwell, the son of an alcoholic wastrel, who began his ministry in a Donald Duck bottling plant and ended up as . . . orator of the "Old Time Gospel Hour," spokesman for the Moral Majority, . . . and self-proclaimed kingmaker of conservative evangelicalism (Flake, 1982, p. 9).

Add to this list the presently-popular Jimmy Swaggart, the late Herbert W. Armstrong, and the esteemed Billy Graham (who has no regular TV program but frequently produces television specials), and you've got a list of the most important religious broadcasters of all time. Hadden and Swann (1981) have developed an intensive examination of the top televangelists and their "extending influence," and Neuendorf and Abelman (1986) have analyzed the communication style of the ten most prominent televangelists and documented their appeal and charisma.

For some televangelists, TV religion is a "family affair"--for example, the founder of the 1930s "Radio Bible Class," M.R. DeHaan, begat "Day of

Discovery's" Richard DeHaan, who begat M.R. DeHaan, host of "On the Move" (Armstrong, 1979). Oral Roberts, W.H. Armstrong, Jimmy Swaggart, and Robert Schuller all have sons following them into televised religion. One may view this trend as spiritual guidance among the generations, or as offspring entering the family business.

Recent scandals have shaken the spiritual empires of two of today's most popular televangelists. Jim Bakker's sexual involvement with a young woman and his payment of so-called "blackmail" money to keep the affair quiet has been made public; Oral Roberts claimed publicly that if his viewers did not contribute an additional $4.5 million to his coffers, God would "call (him) home" (Ostling, 1987). In both cases, what has made some fans and believers a bit more skeptical is the clear importance that has been placed on money for the continuation of independent evangelical television ministries. Roberts' statements have been called "implicit spiritual blackmail," while Bakker claims that his actions were the result of a--literally--diabolical plot executed by a "rival" (purportedly Jimmy Swaggart) as a means of "stealing" the $129 million-a-year PTL network (Ostling, 1987, p. 60). Again, the relative importance of funding and the continuation of TV empires over religious dogma and mainline church participation (Roberts, Swaggart and Bakker are all ministers of large national churches) is presently under close scrutiny within the various religious communities.

Religious Television Networks. The development of such full-scale religious TV networks has been a recent phenomenon in religious broadcasting. The first such sophisticated network, launched on cable TV in 1977, was the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), based in Virginia

Beach, Virginia. Founded by the "700 Club's" Pat Robertson, CBN cablecasts to 23 million American homes, 24 hours a day (Doan, 1984), having grown from one Virginia TV station started in 1960 (Cocks, 1982). CBN sells commercial time to sponsors like Vicks, General Mills, and Kraft to subsidize programming that includes soap opera, early morning news, miniseries, and children's entertainment (Spring, 1982).

This trend toward what CBN calls "family, alternative" programming has, however, garnered its share of criticism: A recent study by the National Coalition on Television Violence noted that CBN carries 12 of the 15 most popular programs on cable TV, and all 12 are "cowboy westerns high in violence," averaging 34 violent acts per hour (CBN and Violence, 1986).

CBN continues to be the nation's largest religious network. Other networks, all primarily disseminated via cable, include the PTL (Praise the Lord) Network, Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), the Eternal Word Television Network (1.6 million subscribers watch programming put out by the Roman Catholic Mother Angelica), and National Jewish Television.

Secular Formats. If evangelicals opened the door to many religious broadcasters, it has been religious TV's adaptability to alternative formats that has swung the door wide and kept it open. Again, it was the CBN network which was the innovator of variety, introducing shows such as "Another Life," a Christian soap opera, "Superbook," a cartoon Bible lesson, and "Don't Ask Me; Ask God," a prime-time special in which celebrities (e.g., Vincent Price, Steve Allen) dramatize questions people say they would like to ask God (Doan, 1984). Another technique pioneered by CBN is the interspersing of such shows and more traditional religious programming with non-religious "family" entertainment, including John

Wayne movies and very old situation comedies (e.g., "Dobie Gillis," "My Little Margie"). Using this non-religious programming as lead-ins for religious shows, CBN has achieved a programming day with a high degree of diversity and attractiveness for its target audience.

Other networks and producers of individual religious programs have followed the model of experimentation with varied formats. Campus Crusade for Christ produces "Athletes in Action," a sports-magazine talk show interspersed with the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church syndicates "Real to Reel," a secular/religious mix modelled in format after the popular non-religious magazine program "PM Magazine." WCFC in Chicago airs "Bible Baffle," a game show which has won a local Emmy, and KGTC in Tulsa broadcasts "The Gourmet Palate," a cooking show accompanied by "spiritual small talk" (O'Driscoll, 1984). With examples from England, Norway, and New Zealand, McClendon (1983) cites a truly international trend of religious broadcasters producing "secular programming" with the "spiritual truths" embedded in the content, rather than religious programming with limited secular appeal.

Although TV evangelists spearheaded many of the changes and trends in religious television, mainline churches have followed with concerted attempts to reclaim some of the audience. Mann (1982) cites instances of the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations breaking into broadcasting in a big way during the early 1980s:

> Unlike a number of their evangelistic competitors, the mainline churches will not be exhorting TV viewers to send in their money or urging them to seek personal salvation. Instead, the shows they are making mostly contain religious and social themes woven into dramas, musical performances, documentaries and newscasts. (p. 60)

The recent growth of religious TV has been phenomenal. The NRB reports the number of organizations producing religious TV programs and films grew from 280 in 1982 to 365 in 1983. And, the number of TV stations devoted exclusively to church-related programming increased from 65 to 79 (Doan, 1984). A 1982 Unda-USA publication identifies 276 different Catholic television and radio programs on the air. This growth trend also includes a movement toward more syndicated religious programs aired at times other than the traditional Sunday morning time slot (Buddenbaum, 1981).

## The Viewership of Religious Television

Obviously, the trend toward diversity in religious broadcasting is aimed at garnering larger audiences, and it has proven effective. The viewership has been expanding over the years--1982 estimates set the total electronic church audience at 10 to 20 million people (Clapp, 1982). Other reports estimate that 115 million people tune into at least one radio show per week, 40 million people view at least one religious TV show each week, and a 1980 Gallup poll showed that 50% of all Americans watch some religious TV, with 8 million people claiming at least weekly viewing (Joffe, 1983). Analysts do predict, however, that increased variety and competition from non-religious cable fare may result in eroding viewership. Clapp (1982) presents the view that religious TV viewership may have peaked and will steadily decline over the next 10 years.

This growth in viewership by way of program diversity has expanded on the traditional audience base of elderly and shut-in individuals seeking mainline religious experiences via broadcasting. This stereotype of religious broadcast audiences has been granted some credence by surveys

that have identified the characteristics of those who frequently view or listen. In a national investigation of religious radio program audiences, Johnstone (1971-72) found almost half of the U.S. adult population listening to a religious radio program at least occasionally (i.e., 20% of respondents indicated they tuned in "often," 28% "occasionally," 26% "seldom", and 25% "never"). Interestingly, Johnstone reported no appreciable change from a 1957 study of Los Angelans--Casmir (1957, as cited by Johnstone, 1971-72) found 24% of those sampled "regularly listened to religious radio, with 24% indicating they "never" listened. Johnstone's national survey identified the typical religious radio listener of circa 1970 as older, residing in Southern states, small towns and rural areas, possessing relatively little education, Protestant (specifically Baptist), attending church regularly, and viewing religion as an important aspect of life. Similarly, the early religious <u>television</u> audiences did tend to be small and specialized. By the mid-1970s, the "stereotype" still held true of an older, predominantly female, audience. Frank and Greenberg (1979) compiled data from a national sample of nearly 2500 over a four-year period, identifying an audience subgroup which watched more religious programming than any other segment--this group consisted largely of females with an average age of 61, who had few interests and reported their biggest problem was loneliness. Interestingly, this group also included the most frequent viewers of game shows and soap operas, indicating that while the stereotype of the homebound religious TV viewer held, their motivation for viewing might have been more secular than mainline religious.

A 1978 survey of Indianapolis residents provided continued support for the stereotype. Buddenbaum (1981) found typical religious TV viewers to

be older, female, and of low socio-economic status. Stacey and Shupe (1982), surveying 711 Dallas-Fort Worth residents, found consumers of the electronic church to be older, female, blue-collar, long-time Texas residents, with less than college education and likely to have children under the age of six. In 1982, Litman and Davis (1983) found the situation unchanged: Heavy viewers of religious TV in two Michigan cities tended to be older and less educated.

Reporting on the most comprehensive survey of U.S. religious TV habits to date (a national survey of 1150 respondents conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications and the Gallup Organization), Hoover (1983) found regular viewers to be concentrated in the traditional "Bible Belt" areas, in small communities, and tending to be poor, female, older, less-educated, and nonwhite.

Evidence of efforts by religious broadcasters to reach a predominantly working-class audience comes from Thomas (1985), who found in interviews with programming personnel that 14 of the total of 23 nationally syndicated Protestant religious TV programs were specifically intended to appeal to working-class viewers.

A number of studies have attempted to not only describe religious TV audiences, but also to explain why they choose religious TV content. In a survey of 174 Michigan respondents, Korzenny and Shatzer (1983) examined the question of whether already-religious individuals selectively choose to view religious television. The data supported this selective exposure hypothesis, with heavy viewers of religious TV reporting greater religiosity and more conservative political attitudes.

Reviewing a dozen sources, mainly unpublished papers, theses and dissertations, Virts and Keeler (1984) found the preponderance of evidence to indicate that those who regularly attend church tend to be more frequent viewers of religious television. Most of the studies identified the heavy religious viewer as older, of low income, low education, female, from Southern or Central states, Protestant, and holding strong conservative religious beliefs. Conversely, Hilton (1980) found members of a Presbyterian congregation to be infrequent viewers of religious TV--40% claimed never to watch, including 100% of the young marrieds surveyed. However, 15% reported having sent money to the electric church.

Tamney and Johnson (1984) tested a variety of potential predictors of religious TV viewing in a survey of 281 Indiana residents. One previously cited contributor to religious TV viewing was simple opportunity (women, the elderly, and other typically non-working segments were seen as having greater opportunity to view); evidence did not support this view. There was support for the idea that people watch religious TV to reinforce religious convictions, in that viewing was significantly and positively related to religious fundamentalism (operationalized as a belief that every word of the Bible is true), a belief in the Christian Right (measured as a set of beliefs that religion should play an important role in the U.S. political system), and Protestantism (as opposed to Catholicism).

No support was obtained for a third prediction that people watch religious programs as a way of lessening their sense of powerlessness through vicarious identification with the televangelists--social class was not a predictor of viewing. A fourth explanation for viewing--that of

using TV religion as a supplement for religious activities--was partially supported. Viewing was related to frequency of praying but not to frequency of attending church services.

Buddenbaum (1981) found evidence that people view religious TV in order to avoid feeling lonely and to "know themselves better," but not to be entertained, to have influence, or to relax and release tension. Gantz and Kowalewski (1979) found that people in a large Eastern metropolitan area view primarily to learn about the Bible and to get "spiritual guidance and fulfillment." Conversely, Hilton's (1980) survey of a Presbyterian congregation found music to be rated the most important aspect of television worship. Bourgault (1985) found fundamentalist viewers to be "entertainment seekers," searching for "diversion with a religious bent . . . rather than a religious experience per se" (p. 147).

Thus, a variety of reasons for watching religious television have been identified. Unfortunately for local religious broadcasters, they often do not possess the resources to research the nature of their own audiences. In a survey of 21 producers of local religious radio programs in a Virginia community, Tucker (1983) found a decided lack of knowledge among the broadcasters of the precise nature of their local audiences. Even monetary feedback was slight--few solicited donations and even fewer received money. Surveying a random sample of local residents, Tucker found the highest rating for any of the 28 radio programs to be 2%. When a New Jersey church was debating whether to acquire a local cable channel to use as a video ministry, research gave them an unpleasant answer--less than 2% of the potential audience reported they would view religious programming, and most of these were already church members (Dunn, 1978).

The Effects of Religious Television

It is probable that religious television not only serves certain universal needs that people bring with them to the viewing situation, but also that there are certain impacts on the viewers, changes which the viewing brings about and which viewers take away with them. In fact, it is the potential for these unsolicited effects that has produced the greatest body of criticism against religious television in the past ten or fifteen years. These criticisms have fallen into three major categories: (1) that televised religion has a negative impact on church attendance; (2) that televangelists, through solicitations of funds, reduce contributions to local churches; and (3) that televised religion has a political component which unduly influences viewers' political attitudes and orientations.

Research on the effects of religious TV has been minimal; it is only since the late 1970s that social scientists have recognized the genre as a potentially important source of media effects. The evidence which does exist to address each of the above criticisms will be reviewed in turn.

Religious TV and church attendance. Earlier, it was noted that religiosity and religious TV viewership tend to go hand-in-hand. Consistent with this, the preponderance of evidence is that TV does not erode church attendance, and that, in general, religious TV viewers are more likely than non-viewers to attend church (Virts & Keeler, 1984; Johnstone, 1971-72; Gerbner et al., 1984; Korzenny & Shatzer, 1983; "Profiling Religious TV Programming," 1984; Stacey & Shupe, 1982). This finding has held for religious radio listening (Johnstone, 1971-72) as well as religious TV viewing; for results of recent studies ("Profiling

Religious TV Programming," 1984) as well as older investigations; for regional studies (Korzenny & Shatzer, 1983) as well as national.

The most comprehensive study to examine this issue, the Annenberg/Gallup national survey described earlier, found that the more time people spend watching secular network television programming, the less likely they are to read the Bible, to attend religious services, or to identify themselves as evangelicals. Viewers of religious television, on the other hand, tend to be active churchgoers (Spring, 1984a). Inconsistent with this, however, is the observation by some scholars (e.g., Horsfield, 1985) that in their broadcast exhortations and mass mailings, televangelists do little to encourage local church attendance while routinely soliciting funds for the televised gospel (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1985b). Also, in a re-analysis of Gallup survey data, Gaddy and Pritchard (1985) found high religious TV viewing to be linked to significantly lower church attendance--but only among Protestants.

Contributions and religious TV. The Annenberg/Gallup study also found viewers of religious TV to be generous contributors to their own congregations. This carry-over contribution effect does not seem to have been studied by other researchers.

The level of contributions to the TV preachers themselves is a closely guarded secret. While the average televangelist will ask for over $300 per broadcast hour (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1985b), it is generally unknown how much is actually sent in. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, founded by Dr. Stanley Mooneyham of World Vision as a self-regulatory reaction to Senate inquiries, had 115 charter members in 1980. Jerry Falwell's ministry was the only charter member among the

regular syndicated national TV ministries (Hadden & Swann, 1981), thus providing little information about the financial situation of prime time preachers.

Only occasionally does a defector from a televangelist's staff provide some insight into contribution levels. Sholes (1979), a former associate producer of Oral Roberts' television ministry, estimated Roberts' incoming donations during the late 1970s at $60 million per year. Similarly, the Jimmy Swaggart Ministry is said to have collected over $60 million in 1983 (Frontline, 1984). In 1980, the top four programs collectively took in over a quarter of a billion dollars (Hadden & Swann, 1981).

A couple of surveys have attempted to quantify or explain contributions of the viewership. The Annenberg/Gallup study found that one-third of the respondents had made financial contributions to the program, with a median individual gift of $30 (Spring, 1984), on an average salary of less than $15,000 (Gerbner et al., 1984). Litman and Davis (1983) found evidence that contributing to religious TV is predicted by being "born again," being non-Catholic, being older, and having little education. They found 10% of those viewing either the 700 Club or the PTL Club reporting contributions to the show's producers, and 28% of those watching certain televangelists (Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Robert Schuller, or Jerry Falwell) contributing to the TV ministry of their choice. In terms of the entire sample, 2% of all adults reported contributing to the 700 or PTL Clubs, and 7% contributing to one or more of the four televangelists. A national survey of 1300 people funded by CBN and conducted by Market Research Group of Detroit indicated that donors to CBN give $4 to other religious organizations (primarily their local church) for every dollar

they donate to CBN (Chandler, 1979).

Religious TV and politics. A 1983 content analysis of religious television found it to be much less political in tone than commonly believed (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1985a). That study found only 17% of all topics discussed on religious TV to be political in nature. However infrequent political discussions might be, their occurrence does spark the interest of advocates of the FCC's Fairness Doctrine, which requires broadcasters to cover contrasting opinions on controversial socio-political issues. A 1978 FCC case found Anita Bryant's anti-gay speechmaking on the "PTL Club" to require equal time for opposing views, rejecting the argument that the issue had been solely "couched in Biblical terms" (Gentry, 1984, p. 265).

Other cases in which "equal time" has been provided to counter the political statements of televangelists include Pat Robertson speaking on abortion, separation of church and state, and commenting on nominees for Surgeon General; and Jerry Falwell speaking on evolution, prayer in the public schools, sex education and textbook censorship. Gentry (1984) predicts a continuation of this trend, because "the evangelists, however sincere in their vision of God's will, are also entrpreneurs, who must reach an audience with messages provocative enough that viewers will fund their broadcast ministries through contributions" (p. 269).

In considering the relationship of politics to religious TV, one must also take into account the many off-air political activities of certain televangelists which have garnered so much criticism since Jerry Falwell first stepped into the political limelight during the presidential election of 1980. For example, the emergence of a New Christian Right,

led by the 1980 ascendancy of Falwell's "Moral Majority" to national noteriety, is a trend toward the intermingling of politics and religion that has continued through Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election. Falwell's political machinations have ranged from a harangue against a nuclear arms freeze (Falwell, 1983) and a televised plea to stop abortions (Gentry, 1984) to a proposed boycott of advertisers on television shows featuring sex and violence (Henry, 1981) and a veritable instruction booklet on "How to Clean Up America" through activities such as "stopping the ERA" and "excising the pornographic cancer" (Falwell, 1981). And although Minnery (1982) argues that Falwell's political organization (the Moral Majority, rechristened the Liberty Federation in 1986) and his religious broadcasting arm (the Liberty Broadcasting Network, which disseminates his durable "Old Time Gospel Hour") are kept "wholly separate," he admits that "many reporters fail to make the distinction" (p. 47).

The failure of viewers to make such distinctions is at the heart of the issue, wherein critics fear that religious TV has mainly political rather than religious impacts. Other than an Annenberg/Gallup finding that viewers of religious television were more likely than non-viewers to say they voted in the last election (Spring, 1984), there has been only a limited amount of systematic investigation into this issue.

Tamney and Johnson (1983) have presented evidence which suggests that watching religious programs partly accounts for support of the "Moral Majority" movement. However, a survey of churchgoers in the Southeast found little support among the respondents for direct church involvement in the political process. Regular viewers ranked TV ministers lower than local ministers, family and friends in relative influence over their vote

for a political candidate. Gaddy (1984), reporting on national survey data collected by the Gallup Organization in 1978, found that the belief that religious institutions should be active in public affairs (including politics) seems to lead to religious broadcast exposure. Use of these media does not, however, influence the belief of how active religious institutions should be in public affairs. Finally, Stacey and Shupe's 1982 survey results show that the "'electronic' church is attracting in general only theologically fundamentalist and conservative Christians who are more interested in religious, as opposed to civil or political, messages" (p. 291).

Thus, overt political activities of televangelists notwithstanding, there is little evidence that viewers are affected politically or seek some political message from religious TV. Pat Robertson's candidacy for the 1988 Presidential race may change this, but observers are noting a quick downturn in Robertson's political popularity as a result of recent televangical scandals (Ostling, 1987).

## The Availability of Religious Television Programming

In spite of increasing attention and speculation aimed at religious television, there exists no contemporary master catalog of available religious programming. All the information cited above leads to a conclusion that religious TV is widespread, increasingly diverse, and appeals to a wide variety of audience needs.

In order to provide benchmark information, a study was designed which would address these questions. We executed a content analysis of television listings for a stratified random sample of 40 U.S. markets over

a two week period in 1983. A whopping 18,845 individual instances of religious TV programs were extracted, constituting 698 different programs. The section which follows summarizes the results of this investigation.

Examining the 100 most widespread religious television programs aired in the U.S. according to how often the program was disseminated (via broadcast and cablecast) during the sample period, and to how many potential viewers the program was made available, we identified a wide range of program types--including popular television evangelists, game shows, cartoons, series, church services, and talk shows. Most interesting to note is the virtual usurpation by "religious television" of program types which had previous been mutually exclusive with religious TV. The old rules of genre or program type are broken--how does one, for example, categorize a program such as "Junior Bible Bowl"? As a game show, a children's show, or as the religious program it claims to be?

Not surprisingly, a large percentage of the 20 most widespread U.S. religious television programs featured evangelists--Jimmy Swaggart (#1), Jim Bakker (#2), "700 Club"--with Pat Robertson (#3), Jerry Falwell (#4), Robert Schuller (#5), Oral Roberts (#6), Rex Humbard (#8), Kenneth Copeland (#9), Ernest Angley (#12), Dr. D. James Kennedy (#13), James Robison (#18), and "Ever Increasing Faith"--with Fred Price (#19).

Other popular genres were also represented in nationally distributed religious programming. Programs featuring drama were quite widespread with shows such as "This is the Life" (#20), "Insight" (#22), "Pattern for Living" (#25) and "Faith for Today" (#26). Continuing dramas (i.e., what in conventional TV fare would be called "soap operas") such as "Another Life" (#24) and "Westbrook Hospital" (#62) were also represented.

Programs aimed primarily at children were included, the most widespread being "Davey and Goliath" (#23), the popular long-running cartoon series produced by the Lutheran Ministries. Those programs with the explicit intention to educate both young and old viewers such as "The Lesson" (#27) and "Lester Sumrall Teaches" (#31) also appeared, in addition to talk shows such as "Jim Bakker" (#3), the "700 Club" (#3), "Day of Discovery" (#10), "Jack Van Impe" (#11) and "Herald of Truth" (#16).

Musical variety shows were also represented in the top 100 with "Camp Meeting U.S.A." (#40) and the "Blackwood Brothers" (#47) both placing in the top 50. "Bible Bowl" (#66) was the only game show to make the top 100. Special event programs such as "Pope John Paul II in Poland" (#30) were represented, as was the news magazine format ("God's News Behind the News," #80). Those viewers who enjoy sports are also served by religious broadcasters ("Athletes in Action," #68) as are those of Hispanic descent ("Cristo Vive," #53). The sample also included programming for those of the Jewish faith with "Zola Levitt" (#41) and "Jewish Voice" (#48) both placing in the top 50. It is important to note, however, that Protestant and Catholic programs outnumber those representing all other religions by approximately 50:1 (Abelman, 1985)--a far cry from the 3:2:1 ratio of free airtime given to religious broadcasters at the birth of television to reflect the representation of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the population.

Not only has the stereotype of a uniform type of religious programming been broken, but so has the stereotype of the Sunday morning monopoly on times for religious TV. Only 35% of all religious shows identified in this study were broadcast or cablecast on Sunday. And only 30% began

between the "typical" hours of 6:00 and 8:59 am; 32% started between 9:00 am and 4:59 pm, 22% between 5:00 and 10:59 pm, and 16% between 11:00 pm and 5:59 am. Seventy-three percent of the episodes were available via broadcast, and 27% on cable. The regular program episodes ranged in length from five minutes to three hours, with some religious specials lasting as long as six hours. The great majority (94%) of the shows lasted an hour or less; 53% were a half-hour and 30% one hour in length.

Obviously, religious programming is not only specialized in format, but also in its appeals to target audiences. Some programs seem to be placed in markets with unique characteristics. An analysis of the top 27 most-available programs found significant differences in the demographic parameters of the markets in which they were available. For example, "Ever Increasing Faith" with Dr. Fred Price--the only Black evangelist featured in the sample--served markets which include large Black populations, averaging 22%. In contrast, "Praise the "Lord," a talk-music show featuring country music, was seen in markets with the lowest percentage of Blacks (11%) but with the largest proportion of Spanish speaking Americans (19%). "Bible Bowl," the only game show to make the top 100, was generally available to large metropolitan areas.

"Zola Levitt" and "Jewish Voice" were the only programs for those of the Jewish faith to make the top 100 most available shows. "Zola Levitt" served markets characterized by a high percentage of high school graduates (69%) and individuals with some college background (21%). "Jewish Voice," interestingly, served markets with a relatively large Black population (20%).

Regarding per capita income, the markets served by Dr. D. James Kennedy registered the highest single-program average at $7,311.12, in contrast to those markets where Ernest Angeley was broadcast, which represented the lowest in the sample at $6,962.48. "Faith For Today" is the program which reached the market with the highest percentage of elderly (12%) while "Praise the Lord" was broadcast to those markets with the lowest percentage of elderly (8%).

As one can see, televised religious programming has evolved substantially since the first regular religious broadcast which began in 1922 on radio station WJBT ("Where Jesus Blessed Thousands") (Flake, 1982) and more recently, since the late-1950s to mid-1960s when "most of the television time allocated to religion was provided gratis as part of a public service requirement" (Curtis, 1978, p. 21). Today, approximately 13.6 million Americans, or 6.2 percent of the viewing audience, regularly tune into televised religious programs (Doan, 1984) which range in a variety comparable to that of secular programming.

## Conclusion

More than any other type of television programming, religious fare is the least understood and the most prone to misconceptions about its prevalence, popularity and impact. The perception that it is limited to the early Sunday morning and late Sunday evening hours is slowly changing, despite the fact that satellite communication and cable technology provide religious fare to many communities seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. The notion that religious programming is more prominent in the southern "bible belt" regions is also false, for as many as five

prospering religious TV networks distribute their programming through more than 212 broadcast stations across the country, carrying many programs which originate from northern and eastern regions. Similarly, the miniscule viewership of this programming is also a myth; an estimated 14 (Joffe, 1983) to 40 million Americans (Gerbner, et. al, 1984) watch at least one religious program each week and much of this programming is broadcast overseas.

Furthermore, as a result of the study presented in this paper, we begin to see that this programming is not only widely available, but is highly diverse and targeted to various and sundry demographic and geographic groups. We begin to see a marketplace that resembles nothing so much as traditional secular TV programming, albeit of a highly conservative, "old-fashioned" flavor (e.g., no R-rated movies are shown, but masculine-oriented violence is featured).

The impact of this plethora of programming is still under investigation. Of primary interest, it would appear, are the televangelical presentations which have grown in number and popularity over the past three decades. As a result of having more undisputed access to the airwaves than any other contemporary social movement in the country, the individuals that comprise the "electronic church" hold the potential to redefine the role of religion for millions of Americans.

With tele-religion, we are perhaps moving toward an embracing of a sociological or "broad" definition of religion, and away from the denominational or "narrow" concept of religion traditionally supported by the U.S. separation of church and state. Goethals (1985) contends that this melding has "blurred the distinctions between the religious and the

secular" (p. 156), noting as an example an integration into President Reagan's press conferences of such typically religious elements as charismatic leadership and the principle of conversion to a cause. Likewise, tele-religion today is far from a simple broadcast display of a mainline religious service. With a "broad" definition of religious television, its history as a uniquely identifiable genre may be over.

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